

Seventh Woodbrook-Mingana Symposium on Arab Christianity and Islam: The Qur'ān and Arab Christianity (17-20 September, 2013)

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Mingana Symposiums are held every four years in Selly Oak, Birmingham, United Kingdom. As a commemoration of the scholar Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937) and his connections with Selly Oak, the symposium series have been exploring the teachings of the Arabic-speaking Eastern Churches and their engagement with the Islamic world.

7th Mingana Symposium was held in Woodbrook Quaker Centre from 17-20 September, 2013 on the theme “*The Qur'ān and Arab Christianity*”. The cosy atmosphere of the event venue and hospitable staff of Woodbrook created a welcoming, friendly environment for the participants. The surrounding garden, which exposed every shade of yellow and green in beautiful British autumn, was especially spectacular.

The symposium started with dinner and followed by the opening session chaired by David Thomas and John Chesworth on *Christian-Muslim Relations, a Bibliographic History 1500-1900*. Prof Thomas and Dr Chesworth summarised the history and background of the project and gave information about the upcoming volumes of CMR series, which will make indispensable contribution to the field of the intellectual history of Christian-Muslim relations.

Sessional presentations started the following day on 18 September. Fourteen papers were presented on wide range of subjects related to Qur'ānic discourse on Christians and receptions and use of the Qur'ān in Arab Christian writings in the middle ages. Afternoon session on the 19th of September was particularly special as it was devoted to the visit to the Mingana Collection. The session started with the display of the early Qur'ān palimpsests preserved in Mingana collection currently held in University of Birmingham Edgbaston Campus. Exhibition was followed by two valuable presentations delivered by doctoral researcher Alba Fedeli on Qur'ān fragments in the Mingana Collection and Prof Gabriel Reynolds on the scholarly debates on the history of the Qur'ān.

The event brought together distinguished scholars in the field of Arab Christianity and Islam from all over the world. Participants enjoyed with

intellectually stimulating discussions, exchange of ideas in the comfort of highly inspiring spiritual aura of the Quaker Centre.

Thomas Hoffmann (“Qur’ānic Christians – new perspectivalist approach”) focused the depiction of Christians in the Qur’an and noted that both Muslims and western scholars have accounted for discrepancies in this depiction by appeal to the traditional Muslim chronology of the *sūras* of the Qur’an. Hoffman noted that this chronology was supplied by Muslims later from outside the Qur’an, and suggested that scholars rather approach the Qur’an as having a “web-like temporarily.” The Qur’an can be viewed as a collection of disparate and contradictory materials about various subjects, representing various factions within the *umma*: a mirror or “hall of mirrors” expressing various critiques and anxieties but also hopes, said Hoffmann

Krisztina Szilágyi (“The solid God of Muḥammad: Reflections on early Muslim interpretation of the Qur’ān in Christian polemic against Islam”) examined Muslim and Arab Christian interpretations of Q 53:7-10 and Q 112 in reference to the term *al-ṣamad* in Q 112:2. She pointed out eight instances from Christian Arabic sources, ranging from the eighth century through eleventh century, that assume that early Muslims understood this term to associate corporealism with the divine. She argued that corporealism might have been more prevalent than previously thought among the first Muslims, and that these Christian critiques were one of the possible reasons for the decline of corporealism in Islamic theology.

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (“Qur’ānic textual archaeology. Rebuilding the story of the destruction of Sodom”) presented a reconstruction of the story of the destruction of Sodom in the Qur’an. His paper argued that we can discover the “textual archaeology” of the Qur’an’s many references to Sodom by assembling them together. The result is that the Qur’an’s homily on the even, probably transmitted via oral or written interactions, suggests a pre-canonical Qur’anic version of the story that was complete and closer to Late Antique versions of the story.

Gordon Nickel (“‘They find him written with them’. The impact of Q 7:157 on Muslim interaction with Arab Christianity”) speculated on the possible impact on Muslim-Christian interaction of the Qur’anic assertion that references to the messenger of Islam would be found in the Torah and Gospel. On the one hand, Nickel argued, the Qur’anic assertion led to a Muslim search for biblical passages that they then claimed were fulfilled in Islam’s messenger. On the other hand, when Jews and Christians denied the existence of such prophecies, Muslims responded with accusations of the malicious falsification of the Torah and Gospel.

Robert Hoyland (“Christian Arabic language and Christian legends in the Qur’ān”) presented his case for the existence of pre-Islamic Christian Arabic literature based on an Arabic *martyrion* inscription dated to ca. 570. His initial question was, “What was the ‘*ajamī*’ language that was spoken by the one who was

teaching the messenger of Islam?” (according to Q 16:103 and Muslim tradition). Hoyland suggested that Christian missionaries were evangelizing Arabic speakers at the time of Islam’s emergence and had developed an Arabic Christian vocabulary. He supported this thesis by discussing the Qur’anic story of the sleepers in the cave (Q 18:9-26).

Mark Beaumont (“‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. Ninth century Christian theology and qur’ānic presuppositions”) discussed the ninth-century Christian writer ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī and his response to the Islamic critique of the Bible in his *Kitāb al-burhān*. Beaumont argued that ‘Ammār was less concerned with philosophical categories inherited from the Greek tradition and was more focused on defending the logic of Christian theology consistent with the presuppositions of Islamic thought based on the Qur’an. ‘Ammār’s motivation, said Beaumont, was to stop the flow of Christians to Islam and to establish the Gospel accounts as the authentic revealed Word of God.

Mike Kuhn (“Paul the Apostle in early Muslim polemics”) explored depictions of the apostle Paul by Muslim writers such as ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025). Kuhn found that according to some Muslim authors, Paul was a pseudo-convert to Christianity—in reality a Jewish infiltrator seeking only to defile the Christian faith. To others, Paul was a Christian sycophant courting Rome’s favour by Romanizing the Gospel while seeking Roman revenge on the Jews. Kuhn said that the purposes of these narratives were to make the case that Paul corrupted Islamic law; that he corrupted *tawḥīd*; and that therefore he corrupted the Christian scriptures.

Emilio Platti and Sandra Keating both presented on the Arab Christian author ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī (ca. 825). Platti (“‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī on the Qur’ān”) discussed the parts of al-Kindī’s *Apology* that present an early account of the Qur’an’s collections and editions, the material on violence in the Qur’an, and the Islamic doctrine of abrogation. He also described al-Kindī’s concept of “three shariahs”: rational/natural law from the Old Testament, divine (*ilāhī*) law from the Gospel; and demonic law from the Qur’an.

Keating (“The Qur’ān in the epistolary exchange of al-Hāshimī and ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī”) pointed out the striking number of quotations from the Qur’an in the *Apology*, and queried the source of knowledge to its Christian Arab author, whom she also dated early. She walked carefully through al-Kindī’s comments on how the Qur’an came together. Al-Kindī asserted that the “miracle” of the Qur’an was small in comparison to the miracles of the prophets and of Jesus, and said that in fact there was greater linguistic perfection in works in other languages such as Greek, Syriac and Hebrew.

Alba Fedeli's study ("Qur'ān fragments in the Mingana Collection") examined a number of early Qur'an fragments from the Mingana Collection. She pointed out examples of textual emendation in early Qur'an manuscripts that suggest a re-writing of text to conform to later canonical versions of the text. Fedeli devoted particular attention to a Qur'an palimpsest in a Christian Arabic manuscript, published by Alphonse Mingana and Agnes Smith Lewis in *Leaves from three ancient Qur'āns*. She suggested that, given the existence of this manuscript, the link between early Islam and Arab Christianity needs further attention in the academy.

Gabriel Said Reynolds ("Current scholarly debates on the history of the Qur'ān") presented the current discussions among scholars about the data of Qur'an manuscripts such as the manuscript described by Alba Fedeli. He noted a "reflex" among many scholars to assume the truth of medieval Muslim traditions about the development of the Qur'an, and then to measure the manuscripts against that Muslim tradition. For example, he highlighted the articles of Behnam Sadeghi on such manuscripts as the San'ā' palimpsest, in which Sadeghi examines the manuscript while assuming the historicity of the *ḥadīth* stories of the fixation of the Qur'anic text by the caliph 'Uthmān.

Ayşe Icoz ("The use of Qur'ānic terms and phrases in the *Kitāb al-majdāl*") examined the use of Qur'anic terms and phrases in the late-tenth-century Christian Arabic encyclopedia *Kitāb al-majdāl*. The *Kitāb* discusses God and his attributes in the first section, the Incarnation in the second, Christian practices in the third, ethical issues in the fourth, and finally history in the fifth part. Icoz presented as an example the author's use of the Qur'anic term *jihād*, which she described as physical struggle or "holy war" in the Qur'an. The *Kitāb* author also knew of another interpretation of *jihād* as spiritual struggle against world desires at the end of the 10th century, said Icoz. Icoz asked a great question about the ethical section of the *Kitāb*: why did the author start this section with the concept of *taqwa* rather than the concept of *maḥabba*?

David Bertaina ("The concept of qur'ānic authority according to Coptic convert Būluṣ ibn Rajā' (ca. 1000)") presented on the concept of Qur'anic authority in the work of a Muslim convert to Coptic Christianity named Būluṣ ibn Rajā' (ca. 1000). Ibn Rajā' had become a Christian after witnessing the martyrdom of a young convert to Christianity along the Suez. Ibn Rajā' was tried for apostasy but was released by an Ismaili judge, after which he built a monastery. Bertaina explained how ibn Rajā' used the Qur'an in a positive sense arguing that his former co-religionists had failed to live up to its standards. He argued that the way ibn Rajā' used the Qur'an contrasted with other Arab Christian assessments of the Qur'an as a distorted scripture.

David Thomas, organizer of the symposium, examined the use of the Qur'ān in the letter of a monk known as Paul of Antioch, written just before 1200 ("The use

and abuse of the Qur'an: Paul of Antioch's Letter to a Muslim friend"). Paul wrote the letter as a report on experiences on a trip from which he had returned, though Thomas suggested that the people described in the letter were not real but merely mouthpieces for Paul's arguments. Paul argued that the true meaning of the Qur'an was to be found in its agreement with Christianity; that the Qur'an was for Arabs alone; and that the expression "no other religion accepted than Islam" (Q 3:85) was also only for Muslims. Thomas said that Paul's use of the Qur'an was effective and even perceived as dangerous by Muslims who answered the letter, but that "due respect for the text deserts him."